

Anthropology 3891/6804, Section 80

The Olmecs & their Neighbors:

America's First Civilization

Fall 2012, Thur, 3:45-6:15 pm

HAH, Rm. 202

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General Course Description:

The emergence of early complex societies remains a focal point of anthropological research throughout the world. In this class, we shall utilize the Olmec – sometimes referred to as “America’s First Civilization” – to explore in depth the emergence of a specific society and the nature, and impact, of its interregional interaction with contemporaneous societies throughout ancient Mexico. Few ancient societies have attracted the kind of rampant speculation as the Olmec; when Olmec colossal heads are not regularly appearing on popular television shows (the *Simpsons*), they are cited as proof of ancient African presence in the New World. Stripped of much of the mystification bestowed upon them by the popular press, the Olmec achievement is even more fascinating; they emerge as the creators of a complex society with monumental art, architecture and iconography that still remains poorly understood.

Due to their importance in understanding complex society in the New World, the Olmec are situated at the nexus of a series of anthropological debates. In this class, we will focus on issues that have a larger resonance in both archaeology and anthropology, for the following **learning outcomes**:

- models for the origins of complex society
- the Olmec level of complexity, settlement pattern, hierarchy and nature of their urban centers
- the role of art and ideology in society
- Olmec impact on/relations with other regions of Mesoamerica
- the creation and destruction of art
- acquisition and long-distance exchange
- sacred landscapes and iconography
- the Olmec legacy in Mesoamerica.

In all of these issues, we also explore *how* archaeologists make these interpretations, and students will be encouraged to challenge and critique the conclusions reached by various scholars.

Graduate Students will have additional readings (see reading list) and meetings. Interested undergraduates are welcome in these discussions as well.

Students with extra challenges:

If you are a student with a documented disability at George Washington University and wish to request a reasonable accommodation for this class, please see me immediately. Keep in mind that reasonable accommodations are not provided retroactively.

Grading:

There will be two brief essays, a combination essay/take-home exam, a group research project, and a final research paper. These items are weighted as follows:

Essay 1	10%
Article Cacique Essay/Critique	10%
Essay 2	20%
Group Research Project	20%
Research Paper	30%
In-class exercises/participation	10%

The standard University system will be used to assign letter grades as follows: A = 92-100; A- = 90-91; B+ = 88-89; B = 82-87; B- = 80-81; C+ = 78-79; C = 72-77; C- = 70-71; D+ = 68-69; D = 62-67; D- = 60-61; F = 0-59.

Academic Integrity

All students will work individually on all assignments unless otherwise instructed. Students are expected to adhere to the GW Code of Academic Integrity. It states: “Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” For the remainder of the code, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>.

Required Textbooks:

In addition to articles placed on Blackboard, there are three required textbooks for the class, available at the bookstore and on reserve at Gelman:

The Olmecs: America’s First Civilization, R. Diehl, 2004, Thames & Hudson.

Etlatongo: Social Complexity, Interaction, and Village Life in the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca, Mexico, J. Blomster, 2004, Wadsworth.

Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica, edited by J. Clark and M. Pye, 2000, Yale University Press/National Gallery of Art. Reprinted 2006.

One additional book is required for graduate students, also available at the bookstore and on reserve at Gelman:

The Beginnings of Mesoamerican Civilization: Interregional Interaction and the Olmec, R. Rosenswig, 2010, Cambridge.

While the remaining articles will be posted on Blackboard, several articles will come from the following book, which is on reserve at Gelman:

Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico, edited by E. Benson and B. de la Fuente, 1996, National Gallery of Art.

Class Schedule and Assignments:

Note: see Reading List for articles to be read for each day; articles must be read for the day under which they are listed.

Date	Topic	Due
08/30	America’s First Civilization? The Olmec in Mesoamerica. Olmec Archaeology: History, Major Issues and Debates.	
09/06	Olman: The Olmec World and Olmec Origins – African or Asian? Pre-Olmec Early Formative Villages and Social Identity.	

09/13	Archaeological Perspectives on Socio-political Complexity. The Emergence of Leaders and Public Space: pre-Olmec chiefdoms in Soconusco and the Gulf Coast.	
09/20	The Rise of San Lorenzo: Urban Space and Daily Life. San Lorenzo Settlement and its Hinterland.	
09/27	Early Olmec Monumental Art: Creation and Destruction, Power and Politics. Portable Art. Interpreting the Rise – and Fall – of San Lorenzo.	Essay 1/ Presentations
10/04	Archaeological Approaches to Early Olmec Cosmology, Ritual and Religion. Were-Jaguars and Dragons: Iconographic Approaches to Olmec Supernaturals and Ideology.	
10/11	Olman Beyond San Lorenzo: Tres Zapote, La Joya. Olmec Political Organization. In-class Debate: San Lorenzo Olmec – Chiefdom or State?	
10/18	Archaeological Approaches to Style and Interaction. Olmec style in Mesoamerica: “Mother” or “Sister” Culture Debate. Interregional Interaction: Olmecs and the Valley of Oaxaca.	
10/25	Interregional Interaction in Oaxaca: the Isthmus and Mixteca/Etlatongo. Sherd Wars: the Debate over Olmec Interaction based on Ceramic Sourcing.	Paper topics due!
11/01	No class – Essay 2/Take-home Exam due in Anthro. Dept. by 4:30.	Essay 2
11/08	Olmecization in Soconusco: Cantón Corralito In-class Debate: Olmec Bodies and Art – is the Wrestler a Fake? Rethinking Olmec Interaction during the San Lorenzo Horizon.	
11/15	San Lorenzo Horizon Interaction: Central Mexico (Group 1). Sacred Landscapes: the La Venta Olmec and La Venta Art. San Lorenzo and La Venta Horizons in Guerrero (Group 2). Chalcatzingo and the La Venta Horizon in Central Mexico (Group 3).	Groups 1, 2 and 3 present
11/22	No Class; Thanksgiving Recess.	
11/29	Olmec-style Materials in the Southeast Periphery/Central America (Group 4), Northeast Honduras (Group 5), and La Venta horizon Soconusco (Group 6). Looking at Olmec Gender.	Groups 4, 5 and 6 present
12/06	Tres Zapotes, Epi-Olmec, and Writing? The Olmec Legacy and Future of Olmec Studies. Paper “in progress” Presentations.	Present papers
12/17	Final papers due in office by 4:30 (No Class).	Papers!!